



Epic

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Epic

Gregory Nagy

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What is epic? For a definition, we must look to the origins of the term. The word epic comes from the ancient Greek noun *epos*. As we are about to see, *epos* refers to a literary genre that we understand as ‘epic’. But the question is, can we say that this word epic refers to the same genre as *epos*? The simple answer is: no. But the answer is complicated by the fact that there is no single understanding of the concept of a genre – let alone the concept of epic.

This is to be expected, since literary genres do not exist in a vacuum. It is not that literature is made up of a fixed set of genres, such as epic, tragedy, and so on. Rather, there are different genres to be found in different literatures. And even the genres we find in any one particular literature may change over time.

Any given genre in any given literature needs to be defined in relation to the other existing genres in that literature.¹ From a worldwide survey of literatures and preliterations, it is evident that genres exist “in a relationship of interdependence, in which they have complementary functions in conveying different aspects of a coherent ideology or system of beliefs about the world.”²

With the advent of modernity, however, the sense of “a coherent ideology or system of beliefs” is eroded. Modern critics react to this erosion by expressing a sense of discomfort with mechanical applications of classifications based on genre.³ One such critic, Benedetto Croce, went so far as to define any great work of literature as something that is *sui generis*.⁴ So, a great work, to be truly great, has to become a genre in and of itself. It is as if a great work of literature had to transcend its own genre simply because of its greatness.

Paradoxically, this modern formulation of Croce applies to the oldest attested genre in European literature. That genre is epic. What defined epic was a great work that was in fact

¹ L. Slatkin, “Genre and Generation in the Odyssey,” *MHTIC: Revue d’anthropologie du monde grec ancien* 2 (1987) 259-268.

² Slatkin p. 260.

³ See Tz. Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (translated by C. Porter; Cambridge and New York 1990); originally published as *Les genres du discours* (Paris 1978).

⁴ B. Croce, *Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale* (Bari 1902).

considered to be *sui generis*. The genre of epic as understood by ancient critics was ultimately defined by the greatest work of literature in the general estimation of the ancient Greeks. That work was a combination of two mutually complementary {19|20} poetic compositions attributed to a figure who was venerated as the greatest of all poets. That figure, who was considered to be so ancient as to be prehistoric even for the ancients, was Homer. And the two mutually complementary compositions attributed to Homer were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Looking for testimony from the ancient world, we find the clearest and most accurate overall assessment of these two poems in the *Poetics* of Aristotle, who flourished in the city of Athens in the fourth century BCE. This assessment is linked to his view of epic as a genre.

Aristotle compares epic with other genres such as tragedy, dithyramb, and comedy. Epic is the first of these genres to be mentioned at the very beginning of the *Poetics* (1447a):

Concerning poetic craft [*poiētikē (tekhnē)*] in and of itself, and its forms [*eidos* (plural)], and what potential each form has; and how mythical plots [*muthoi*] must be put together if the poetic composition [*poiēsis*] is to be good at doing what it does; and how many parts it is made of, and what kinds of parts they are; and, likewise, all other questions that belong to the same line of inquiry - let us speak about all these things by starting, in accordance with the natural order, from first principles. So, the composition of epic [*epopoia* = the *poiēsis* of *epos*] and the composition [*poiēsis*] of tragedy, as well as comedy and the poetic craft [*poiētikē (tekhnē)*] of the dithyramb and most sorts of crafts related to the *aulos*⁵ and the *kithara*⁶ - all of these crafts, as it happens, are instances of re-enactment [*mimēsis*],⁷ taken as a whole. There are three things that make these instances of re-enactment different from each other: [[1]] re-enacting [*mimēisthai*] things in different media, or [[2]] re-enacting different things, or [[3]] re-enacting in a mode [*tropos*] that is different and not the same as the other modes.

As we learn from Aristotle's subsequent analysis in the *Poetics*, the act of re-enactment or *mimēsis* was considered to be an act of representing a pre-existing something. The various different media used for representation involved various different combinations or non-combinations of recitation, singing, dancing, and the playing of musical instruments like the *kithara* and the *aulos*. In the case of epic in the time of Aristotle, its medium was recitation, without instrumental accompaniment.

⁵ The *aulos* was a double reed, most similar in morphology to the oboe.

⁶ The *kithara* was a seven-string lyre.

⁷ Here the word is in the plural, and I render it as 'instances of re-enactment'. In the singular, the basic idea of *mimēsis* is 're-enactment': see G. Nagy, *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore 1990) 1§§46-50.

As for the mode of making a re-enactment or *mimēsis* in the genre of epic, it was basically diegetic, which is to say that the actions of characters were being re-enacted by way of *diēgēsis* or ‘narration’; by contrast, the mode of making a re-enactment in other genres like tragedy or comedy was dramatic, which is to say that the actions of characters were being re-enacted by actors interacting with each other or with a singing and dancing ensemble called the *khōros* or ‘chorus’. It is important to add that the act of narrating epic in the time of Aristotle was in its own right an act of re-enactment or *mimēsis*. That is because the narrator of epic was in effect re-enacting characters whenever he quoted, as it were, the words spoken by these characters in the act of interacting with each other. It is also because the narrator of the narrative that is epic was in effect re-enacting a notionally prototypical master narrative, narrated by a notionally prototypical master narrator, that is, by Homer. {20|21}

In order to discern more precisely Aristotle’s view of epic as a genre, we need to look more closely at the terminology he uses in the statement I have quoted. His word for ‘genre’, *eidos*, is used in a comparable way by his teacher, Plato, in contexts of analyzing the genres of poetry and songmaking as found in the performances of drama (as in *Laws* 3.700a). But Plato also uses *eidos* in the absolutized sense of ‘Form’ with reference to his Theory of Forms (as in *Republic* 10.596a). For Aristotle, by contrast, an *eidos* ‘genre’ like epic is to be defined comparatively in relation to the other genres that he is considering, such as tragedy.⁸ Aristotle’s point of view is validated by comparative evidence: as we have already noted, a genre is not something absolute but relative, depending on the coexistence of given genres at a given time and place.⁹

Aristotle’s assessment of epic as a genre takes into consideration not only other coexisting genres but also the nature of poetry itself. His key expression is *poiētikē* (*tekhnē*) ‘poetic craft’. The adjective *poiētikē* can be translated as ‘poetic’ simply because it refers to the craft of composing poetry. Similarly, the noun *poiēsis* can be translated as ‘poetry’ simply because it refers to the act of composing poetry. But the more basic idea inherent in these words deriving from the stem *poiē-* is ‘composition’ pure and simple. The verb *poiēin*, which means ‘compose’ or simply ‘make’, can refer to the making of any artifact, not only an artifact that happens to be a poem.¹⁰ So the fact that *poiēsis* and *poiētikē* are used exclusively to refer to the making of poetry, not to any other kind of making, shows that making poetry was considered to be a most basic kind of making. That is why *poiēsis* means not just any kind of making but rather, more specifically, the making of poetry.

⁸ G. Nagy, “Epic as Genre,” *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community* (eds. M. Beissinger, J. Tylus, and S. Wofford; Berkeley and Los Angeles 1999) 21-32, especially p. 29n22.

⁹ Slatkin (n. 1).

¹⁰ A. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton NJ 2002) 132-139.

Studying the various poetic genres considered by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, we find that the making of poetry is not only a matter of composition. It is also a matter of performance. Essentially, the genres he considers happen to correspond to two programs of performances that took place at the two greatest festivals of the Athenian state. At the feast of the City Dionysia of Athens, celebrated in the early spring, there were competitions in the performances of tragedies, comedies, dithyrambs, and satyr dramas. At the feast of the Panathenaia of Athens, celebrated in the late summer, there were competitions in the performances of tunes played on the *kithara* or on the *aulos*, also of lyric songs sung to instrumental accompaniment by the *kithara* or by the *aulos*, and also of epic poetry recited without any instrumental accompaniment.¹¹

From the wording of Aristotle, it is clear that each one of these genres was associated with a distinct *tekhnē* ‘craft’. That is, the overall *poiētikē tekhnē* ‘poetic craft’ was subdivided into a variety of specialized *tekhnai* ‘crafts’. One such craft was epic.

The term that Aristotle uses to designate the craft of making epic, *epopoia* ‘making of *epos*’, indicates that the concept of making epic was equated with the most general concept of making poetry, since the word used to designate ‘epic,’ *epē*, which is the plural of *epos*, is simply the general word used to designate any kind of poetry produced by way of *poiēsis*, that is, by way of ‘making’ poetry. For {21|22} example, in a comedy dating back to the fifth century BCE, the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, *epē* refers to the recited ‘verses’ of his comedy (verse 544); in another one of his comedies, the *Frogs* (verse 862), *epē* again refers to the recited ‘verses’ - as opposed to the sung ‘lyrics’, which are *melē* (*melos* plural).

This usage, dating back to the classical period of comedy in the fifth century BCE, is most significant. We have already seen that the act of making poetry, *poiēsis*, was considered to be a most basic kind of making. Now we see that the act of making epic poetry, *epopoia*, was considered to be a most basic kind of making poetry itself, since *epē* can refer to any kind of poetic verse that is recited - even the recited verses of comedy as distinct from the sung verses in that genre. In other words, to say *epē* is the most general way of referring to the ‘verses’ of poetry. The linguistic prehistory of *epē* helps explain its ultimate meaning: etymologically, this word means simply ‘words’ or ‘wording’. It is cognate with Latin *vox*, the meaning of which is parallel: that word refers to whatever sounds are made by the human voice.

Though the ancient Greeks perceived epic as a most general category in the era of Aristotle, it had a most special status in their civilization. It was considered to be poetry *par excellence*. The key to this status was the poet *par excellence*, Homer. This figure was considered to be the supreme poet not only of epic but also of all poetry. As we see from the usage of Plato

¹¹ G. Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge 1996) 81-82; also “Epic as Genre” (n. 8) 26-27. Further elaboration in A. Rotstein, “Aristotle, *Poetics* 1447a13-16 and Musical Contests.” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 149 (2004) 39-42.

(*Gorgias* 485d) as well as Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1.1365a11), to say *ho poiētēs* ‘the poet’ without any mention of a name was tantamount to saying ‘Homer’. Homer was for them and for all Greeks of their time the Poet par excellence.

In the age of Plato and Aristotle, the prehistoric figure called Homer was understood to be the poet who composed two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Other epics were attributed to figures other than Homer. Those epics, which were classed in a grouping of epics known as the Cycle (*kuklos*), were considered inferior to the two epics attributed to Homer. Aristotle says so explicitly in his *Poetics*, naming two epics of the Cycle as examples, the *Cypria* and the *Little Iliad* (1459a-b).¹²

In order to understand the special status of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, more needs to be said about the actual performance traditions of epic in the time of Plato and Aristotle. By that time, the traditions of performing epic at the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens had achieved a most specialized status. The performers were professional specialists called *rhapsōidoi* or ‘rhapsodes’, as we see most clearly from a dialogue of Plato, the *Ion*, named after a celebrated *rhapsōidos* ‘rhapsode’ who flourished in the late fifth century BCE, the era of the historical Socrates.

The status of the rhapsode can be reconstructed from the following words of Plato’s Socrates (Plato *Ion* 533b-c):

Here is another thing. As far as I can tell, neither in [[1]] playing on the *aulos* [= *aulēsis*] nor in [[2]] playing on the *kithara* [= *kitharisis*] nor in [[3]] singing and playing on the *kithara* [= *kitharōidia*] nor in [[4]] performing as a rhapsode [= *rhapsōidia*] have you seen any man who is skilled at explaining about [[1]] *Olympus*¹³ or about [[2]] *Thamyras*¹⁴ or about [[3]] *Orpheus* or about [[4]] *Phemios* of Ithaca, the rhapsode [= *rhapsōidos*]¹⁵ - but who is perplexed about *Ion* of {22|23} *Ephesus* and is unable to formulate what things *Ion* performs well as a rhapsode [= *rhapsōideîn*] and what things he does not.

¹² For editions of the epic Cycle, see A. Bernabé, ed., *Poetae Epici Graeci I* (Leipzig 1987) and M. Davies, ed., *Epicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Göttingen 1988).

¹³ The figure of *Olympus* is a prototypical master of the *aulos*; sources and commentary in *Pindar’s Homer* (n. 7) 3§§7, 16-17, 36, 39.

¹⁴ The figure of *Thamyras* / *Thamyris* is a prototypical master of the *kithara* in *Iliad* 2 594-600; commentary in *Pindar’s Homer* (n. 7) 12§71n199.

¹⁵ The figure of *Phemios* is a prototypical singer of epic in *Odyssey* i, xvii, and xxii. I will have more to say about him later. On *Phemios* as a *rhapsōidos* ‘rhapsode’, see B. Graziosi, *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic* (Cambridge 2002) 25, 39-40; her interpretation is different from the one I offer in what follows.

In this passage, Socrates links the rhapsodes with other professional performers such as auletes (*aulos*-players), citharists (*kithara*-players), and citharodes (*kithara*-singers). These types of performers correspond to the performers that actually competed at the Panathenaia in the age of Plato, as we learn from an Athenian inscription dated at around 380 BCE (IG II² 2311), which records the winners of competitions in performance at the Panathenaia.¹⁶ We also learn about these categories of competition from Plato's *Laws* (6.764d-e), where we read of rhapsodes, citharodes, and auletes - and where the wording makes it clear that the point of reference is the Panathenaia.¹⁷

The evidence from Plato about these categories of competition at the Panathenaia is supplemented by what we read in the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians* (60.1), where the author refers to these same Panathenaic categories of competition and where the overall competition is specified as the 'competition [*agōn*] in *mousikē*'.

What does the author mean by *mousikē* here? In Aristotelian usage, this word is a shorthand way of saying *mousikē tekhnē*, meaning 'craft of the Muses', that is, 'musical craft' in the etymological sense of the word musical. It is misleading, however, to think of ancient Greek *mousikē* in the modern sense of 'music', since the categories of 'musical' performers at the Panathenaia included rhapsodes. The performative medium of rhapsodes in the era of Aristotle was recitative and thus not 'musical' in the modern sense of the word. By recitative, to be more precise, I mean (1) performed without singing and (2) performed without the instrumental accompaniment of the *kithara* or the *aulos*.¹⁸ In this era, the competitive performances of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by rhapsodes at the Panathenaia were 'musical' only in an etymological sense, and the medium of the rhapsode was in fact closer to what we call 'poetry' and farther from to what we call 'music' in the modern sense of the word. Still, the fact remains that the performances of rhapsodes belonged to what is called the 'competition [*agōn*] in *mousikē*', just like the performances of citharodes (*kithara*-singers), citharists (*kithara*-players), auletes (*aulos*-players), and so on.¹⁹

The 'musical' performers mentioned in Plato's *Ion* need to be seen in the light of the dramatic moment that serves as the setting for this Platonic dialogue. Ion, a rhapsode from the city of Ephesus, has just arrived in Athens, intending to compete for first prize at the festival of the Panathenaia (*Ion* 530b). Plato's wording makes it explicit that the occasion for performances by rhapsodes at the Panathenaia was in effect a competition or contest among rhapsodes, an *agōn* (*Ion* 530a), and that the agonistic craft of the rhapsodes is included under

¹⁶ Further analysis in G. Nagy, *Plato's Rhapsody and Homer's Music: The Poetics of the Panathenaic Festival in Classical Athens* (Cambridge MA and Athens 2002) 38-39, 42 (n. 16), 51.

¹⁷ *Plato's Rhapsody* 38, 40, 42.

¹⁸ *Plato's Rhapsody* 36, 41-42.

¹⁹ *Plato's Rhapsody* 36, 41-42.

the general category of *mousikē* (530a). When Ion says that he hopes to win first prize at the Panathenaia, he adds that he has just won first prize in an *agōn* of rhapsodes at the feast of the Asklepieia in Epidauros (530a-b).²⁰ {23|24}

At the *agōn* ‘competition’ of *mousikē* held at the Panathenaia, the contests of citharodes, aulodes, citharists, and auletes may have varied in content from one season to the next, but the overall content of what the rhapsodes had to perform was invariable – at least, it had become an invariable by the time of Plato. That invariable was the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, performed season after season at the Panathenaia.

Though we know precious little about the Panathenaic performances of Homer by rhapsodes in the age of Plato, there is sufficient evidence for positing three features: (1) the rhapsodes performed in sequence the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; (2) each of these two epics was divided into twenty-four rhapsodic performance-units or *rhapsōidiai* ‘rhapsodies’; and (3) the rhapsodes were actively competing as well as collaborating with each other in the process of taking turns in performing sequentially the epic narrative.²¹ There is room for doubt about the specifics of all three of these posited features,²² but there is one overall feature, essential to the argument at hand, that seems beyond doubt: in the era of the Athenian democracy, the repertoire of rhapsodes performing at the Panathenaia was confined exclusively to the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.²³

To advance the argument further, I adduce three interconnected details. The first two come from the *Ion* of Plato, while the third comes from the *Panegyricus* of Isocrates.

The first detail has to do with a boast made by the rhapsode Ion: he claims that he is worthy of being awarded the prize of a golden *stephanos* ‘garland’ by the *Homēridai* ‘descendants of Homer’ (*Ion* 530d). The prize that is mentioned here is mentioned again in two other contexts (*Ion* 535d, 541c). In one of these two contexts, the golden garland is associated with the words *thusiai* ‘feasts’ and *heortai* ‘festivals’ (*Ion* 535d). These words are appropriate designations of the festival of the Panathenaia. Piecing together what we learn from all three contexts (*Ion* 530d, 535d, 541c), I infer that the awarding of a golden garland to Ion by the *Homēridai* is connected with the winning of first prize in the competition of rhapsodes at the

²⁰ Plato’s *Rhapsody* 22, 37–38, 99.

²¹ Plato’s *Rhapsody* 36–69. For a comparative perspective on the concept of competition-in-collaboration, see *Poetry as Performance* (n. 11) 18.

²² J. S. Burgess, “Performance and the Epic Cycle.” *Classical Journal* 100 (2004) 1–23, with citations.

²³ Plato’s *Rhapsody* (n. 16) 10–12.

Panathenaia.²⁴ An additional piece of evidence is the inscription I mentioned earlier (IG II² 2311) concerning the prizes won at the Panathenaia in Athens for the year 380 BCE: here we read that the first prize in the competition of citharodes is a golden *stephanos* ‘garland’ valued at 1000 drachmas, which is awarded in addition to a cash prize of silver valued at 500 drachmas. Though the portion of the inscription dealing with the competition of rhapsodes is lost, it is generally agreed that the missing portion indicated that the first prize in the corresponding competition of rhapsodes was likewise a golden *stephanos* ‘garland’, and that the amount of cash awarded as first prize to the winning rhapsode was comparable to the amount awarded to the winning citharode.²⁵

The fact that the *Homēridai* are linked with the performances of Homeric poetry by rhapsodes at the Panathenaia in Athens is relevant to another fact: Homer himself is linked with the performances of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Athens. Evidence for the linkage comes from myths preserved in the *Lives of Homer* traditions, especially in the *Herodotean Life of Homer* (Vita 1) and in the *Certamen* or *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* (Vita 2).²⁶ According to the *Certamen*, the people {24|25} of the island state of Chios claimed that Homer was the ancestor of a *genos* ‘lineage’ from Chios who called themselves the *Homēridai* (Vita 2.13-15). According to the *Herodotean Life of Homer*, Homer composed both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the city of Chios (Vita 1.346-398) and planned to perform both epics in Athens (1.483-484), but he died before he reached his destination (1.484-509). In this version, the myth specifies that Homer augments his composition of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by adding verses that center on the glorification of Athens (1.378-398). Only after he finishes his glorification of Athens does Homer finish composing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: only then does he take leave of Chios and set sail to tour the rest of Hellas (1.400), intending ultimately to reach the city of Athens (1.483-484). I infer that these references picturing Athens as the ultimate destination for Homer’s would-be performance of his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are a mythological analogue to the ritual presence of the *Homēridai* at the rhapsodes’ actual performances of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* at the Panathenaia in Athens.

I now come to a second interconnected detail in Plato’s *Ion*: it has to do with the dramatized circumstances of the *Ion*’s dialogue with Socrates, which happens on the eve of the day when this rhapsode enters the *agōn* ‘competition’ of *mousikē* at the Panathenaia (530a-b): as we saw, it is made clear that *Ion* will be competing with other rhapsodes in the performance of

²⁴ In one of these contexts (Plato *Ion* 535d), it is specified that *Ion* already wears a golden garland while he is performing Homer. Perhaps *Ion* had already won first prize at the Panathenaia on a previous occasion.

²⁵ *Plato’s Rhapsody* (n. 16) 51.

²⁶ G. Nagy, “L’aède épique en auteur: la tradition des Vies d’Homère.” *Identités d’auteur dans l’Antiquité et la tradition européenne* (ed. C. Calame and R. Chartier: Grenoble 2004) 41-67. My citations from Vita 1 and Vita 2 follow the line-numbers in the edition of T. W. Allen, *Homeri Opera* V (Oxford 1912).

Homeric poetry, and that he expects to win the first prize in that competition.²⁷ Of special interest here is the term *mousikē* (*tekhnē*), which means literally ‘craft (*tekhnē*) of the Muses’. As we saw earlier, it would be anachronistic to translate this term as ‘music’, since it applies not only to the craft of singing lyric accompanied by the *kithara* or *aulos*, as represented by citharodes and aulodes, but also to the craft of reciting epic without any instrumental accompaniment. That particular craft is represented by rhapsodes at the Panathenaia.

The third and decisive interconnected detail comes from a passage in the *Panegyricus* of Isocrates (159), concerning the repertoire of rhapsodes competing with each other in the *athloi* ‘competitions’ of *mousikē* at the Panathenaia:

I think that the poetry [*poiēsis*] of Homer received all the more glory because he celebrated so beautifully those who waged war against the barbarians, and it was because of this that our (Athenian) ancestors wanted to make his craft [*tekhnē*] a thing to be honored both in the competitions [of rhapsodes] in *mousikē* and in the education of the young, so that we, having the chance to hear often his [= Homer’s] verses [*epos* plural], may learn thoroughly the existing hostility against them [= the barbarians], and so that we may admire the accomplishments of those who had waged war and desire to accomplish the same deeds that they had accomplished.²⁸

For Isocrates, Homer is the foundational point of reference to what we would call “Western” civilization, in sharp contrast to the “barbarians.” In the reference that this contemporary of Plato is making here to Homer, the wording assumes that the epics performed at the Panathenaia were totally familiar to all Athenians. Such epics, in the Athens of Isocrates and Plato in the fourth century BCE, can only be the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Even in the general usage of Isocrates (2.48; 10.65; 12.18, 33, 293; 13.2), we find that the term *Homer* refers to no poet other than the {25|26} poet of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The same goes for the general usage of Plato himself (a case in point is *Ion* 539d).

Also relevant in this passage from Isocrates is the designation of Homeric *poiēsis* ‘poetic composition’ as a *tekhnē* ‘craft’. As we see from his wording, Isocrates links the craft of Homer with (1) the Panathenaic *athloi* ‘competitions’ of rhapsodes and (2) the *paideusis* ‘education’ of the young. In view of the fact that *mousikē* was an appropriate term for designating not only the craft of, say, citharodes performing lyric poetry at the Panathenaia but also the craft of rhapsodes performing the epic poetry of Homer at the same festival, I stress once again that it is misleading to understand *mousikē* as ‘music’ in the modern sense of the word.

²⁷ By implication, *Ion* was performing Homeric poetry also at the *agōn* ‘competition’ of rhapsodes at the festival of the Asklepieia in Epidaurus, where it is said that he likewise won the first prize (*Ion* 530a).

²⁸ Commentary in *Poetry as Performance* (n. 11) 111n24.

Pursuing this idea of the rhapsode as a master of *mousikē*, I return to the passage I quoted earlier from Plato's *Ion* (533b-c). We saw there a list of mythical prototypes corresponding to the categories of performers who compete in the *agōn* 'competition' of *mousikē* at the Panathenaia. The correspondences are anachronistic - and revealing in their anachronisms. There is Orpheus, master *kitharōidos* 'citharode', that is, one who sings while accompanying himself on the *kithara*; there is Thamyras, master *kitharistēs* 'citharist', that is, one who plays on the *kithara* but does not sing;²⁹ there is Olympus, master *aulētēs* 'aulete' that is, one who plays on the reed or *aulos*; and, finally, there is Phemios, master *rhapsōidos*, that is, 'rhapsode'. The key figure in this quartet is Phemios the rhapsode. By contrast with the generic rhapsode who recited Homer in the age of Plato, without musical accompaniment, the prototypical rhapsode Phemios matches an earlier vision of Homer: inside the narrative of the Homeric *Odyssey*, Phemios is not a reciter but an *aoidos* 'singer' (i 325, 346, 347; xxii 330, 345, 376) who literally 'sings' (*aeidein* i 154, 155, 325, 326, 350; xvii 262; xxii 331, 346, 348; noun *aoidē* i 159, 328, 340, 351) as he performs his epics inside the epic of the *Odyssey* (at i 326, the epic sung by Phemios is a *nostos* 'song of homecoming'), and he even accompanies himself on the equivalent of a *kithara*, the *kitharis* (i 153, 159; elsewhere, his instrument is called a *phorminx* xvii 262; xxii 332, 340; verb *phormizein* i 155).

What, then, is the formal difference in Plato's *Ion* between Phemios the 'rhapsode' and Orpheus the 'citharode' or 'kithara-singer'? After all, Orpheus - just like Phemios - is imagined as singing and accompanying himself on the *kithara*. The difference is that Phemios, as a 'rhapsode', is a worthy point of comparison for Homer as the ultimate poet, whereas Orpheus, as a 'citharode', is not. The 'music' of Phemios as a rhapsode is central at the Panathenaia in the days of Plato, whereas the 'music' of Orpheus is marginalized. Even as a citharode, Orpheus is mockingly marginalized (Plato *Symposium* 179d-e).

Let us pursue further the idea that Orpheus, the mythical citharode of Plato's *Ion*, is a specialist in 'music' and thus a foil for Homer. The same goes for Thamyras the mythical citharist and for Olympus the mythical aulete: they too are specialists and thus foils for Homer.³⁰ By contrast, Phemios the mythical rhapsode is a surrogate for Homer as the ultimate generalist in the 'music' of the Panathenaia. Not only the mythical rhapsode but also the contemporary rhapsodes in the days of Plato - as represented by Ion himself - figure as surrogates of Homer {26|27} in the context of the Panathenaia. As I noted before, the performances of Ion and his colleagues at that festival are restricted to the Homeric *Iliad* and

²⁹ The non-singing role of the *kitharistēs* 'citharist' may be aetiologically connected with a myth about a primal 'musical' competition between Thamyras / Thamyris and the Muses (*Iliad* II 594-600). When Thamyris (as he is called in the *Iliad*) challenges the Muses to a duel in singing to the lyre, he is punished for his arrogance by being stuck dumb in the course of the contest. So this proto-citharist is pictured as a citharode who lost his voice.

³⁰ In the case of Thamyras, he is presented by Homeric poetry itself as an implicit foil for Homer.

Odyssey. As surrogates of Homer, the rhapsodes performing at the Panathenaia must be generalists in ‘music’ just like Homer, who is viewed as the generalized embodiment of poetry par excellence in the days of Plato. That is why Homer is known as the *poiētēs* ‘Poet’ par excellence and that is why his compositions are known as *poiēsis* ‘poetry’ or ‘poetic creation’ par excellence.

Thus the generic rhapsode performing the poetry of Homer at the Panathenaia becomes a generalized representative of poetry as ‘music’: his identity extends from the prototypical singer who sings Homeric song all the way to the contemporary rhapsode who recites Homeric poetry. By extension, Ion the rhapsode may at first seem like a generalized representative of poetry in his own right, for the simple reason that he is a representative of Homeric poetry. To the extent that Homer the poet is considered a generalist, not a specialist, so too the rhapsode who performs Homer may at first seem like a generalist in poetry.

If Ion the rhapsode is a generalist in poetry, then he can be held responsible by Plato’s Socrates not only for Homeric poetry but also for all poetry. That is Ion’s good fortune, from his own standpoint as the most prestigious rhapsode in his time, ‘the best rhapsode of the Hellenes’ (Plato *Ion* 541b).³¹ That is also Ion’s misfortune, from the standpoint of the philosophical agenda built into the dialogue named after him. If Plato’s Socrates can succeed in discrediting Ion, he can discredit a man who represents the best of all poetry in the days of Plato.³² In the process, Plato is also discrediting the Panathenaic standard of Homeric poetry, which sets the criteria for what is the best of all poetry.

One way for Socrates to discredit Ion is to show that the rhapsode who performs Homer, unlike Homer, is in fact no generalist in poetry. Plato’s Socrates forces Ion to admit that he is a specialist: when Socrates asks Ion whether he is an expert in the poetry of Hesiod or Archilochus, the rhapsode replies that he is not, and that his expertise in Homer is *hikanon* ‘sufficient’ (*Ion* 531a).³³ Ion is forced to admit that he is an expert in Homer - and Homer only -

³¹ I see no reason to doubt the pre-eminence of Ion in the historical time that corresponds to the dramatized time of his encounter with Socrates, sometime in the fifth century, when the city of Ephesus was still under the domination of the Athenian empire. In general, it is important to keep in mind that Plato chooses worthy opponents for Socrates. When Plato’s Socrates predicts that Ion will win first prize in the Panathenaic competitions that follow the day of their encounter with each other (*Ion* 530b), I have no reason to doubt that this detail amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy, and that the whole dialogue is predicated on the general success of Ion as a rhapsode.

³² For more on this idea, see *Plato’s Rhapsody* (n. 16) 9-35.

³³ To paraphrase more closely: in Plato *Ion* 531a-532b, when the rhapsode Ion says that he can perform and interpret the poetry of Homer but not the poetry of Hesiod and Archilochus, it is implied that other rhapsodes do indeed perform and interpret the poetry of Hesiod and

but he justifies his non-expertise in other poets on the grounds that Homer is superior to all other poets (531a-532c).³⁴ This formulation suits perfectly a Panathenaic rhapsode, in terms of my argument that Homeric poetry was the only poetry performed by rhapsodes at the Panathenaia in the days of Plato.

In the context of the Panathenaia, the figure of Homer evolved to the point of becoming the all-sufficient poet, the ultimate generalist in poetry. By the age of Plato, the feast of the Panathenaia could leave no room for any poet other than Homer in the rhapsodic competitions - no Hesiod, no Archilochus - not to mention Orpheus and Musaeus or the poets of the epic Cycle. Only in the citharodic (and aulodic) competitions at the Panathenaia was there room left for other poets - and these poets had to be non-epic poets, that is, lyric poets like Simonides.³⁵

And yet, all early poets are linked, says Plato's Socrates, to the single and absolute source of poetic or 'musical' inspiration, the Muses. Just as rhapsodes are *hermēneis* 'interpreters' of poets, so also poets are *hermēneis* 'interpreters' of the {27|28} Muses (*Ion* 535b). I am about to quote a passage from Plato's *Ion* (536a-c) where a collectivized concept of the Muses as a single absolute source of all poetry or 'music' - in the literal sense of *mousikē* 'craft [tekhne] of the Muses' - is expressed by Socrates through the metaphor of the Heracleian or Magnesian stone, that is, the magnet (*Ion* 533d). Poets are imagined as metallic rings directly 'linked' to a prototypical magnet of poetic inspiration, the Muses. Poets, as direct links to the magnet, are the *prōtoi daktulioi* 'first rings'. As we are about to see, Plato's Socrates expresses the direct 'linkage' of the metallic rings to the prototypical magnet by way of the verb *exartân* 'link', which I will translate as 'magnetically link', and he makes it explicit that the poets symbolized by the metallic rings are likewise prototypical, namely, Orpheus, Musaeus, and Homer - in that order (Plato *Ion* 536a-c):

One of the given poets [*poiētai*] is magnetically linked [*exartân*] to one Muse, and another poet [*poiētēs*] to another Muse. And we express this idea [= *auto* 'it' = passive of *exartân* = 'is magnetically linked to'] by saying 'is possessed by' [= passive of *katekhein*]. And it [= the idea of 'is possessed by'] {b} is pretty much the same sort of thing, since he [= the poet] is literally 'held fast' [= passive of *ekhein*] (by the Muse). Then, from these first rings, that is, from the poets [*poiētai*], each different person is magnetically linked [*artân*] to a different poet [*poiētēs*], becoming divinely possessed [= *entheos*]: some persons are magnetically linked to Orpheus, some to Musaeus, and the majority, to Homer; they [= these persons] are

Archilochus. For further evidence about the rhapsodic performance of Hesiod and Archilochus, see Athenaeus 620b-c and the commentary in *Poetry as Performance* (n. 11) 159, 162-163.

³⁴ According to *Ion*, even where Homer and Hesiod overlap in content, they are different in quality (532a). By contrast, Plato's Socrates is represented as an expert in non-Homeric poetry as well. His expertise in Hesiodic and Orphic traditions is especially to be noted.

³⁵ On Simonides at the Panathenaia, see Graziosi (n. 15) 225-226.

possessed [= passive of *katekhein*] (by the poets), and they are literally ‘held fast’ [= passive of *ekhein*]. You, Ion, are one of these persons, and you are possessed [= passive of *katekhein*] by Homer. When anyone sings the poetry of any other poet, you are asleep and do not know what to say, but when anyone voices the song of this poet [= Homer], then, right away, you are awake and your spirit is dancing and you know very well what {c} to say. For you say what you say about Homer not by means of a craft [*tekhnē*] or expertise [*epistēmē*] but rather by means of a god-given legacy [*moira*] and a state of possession [*katokōkhē*].

Of supreme importance is the image of the First Rings (*prōtoi daktulioi*) as visualized here in Plato’s *Ion* (536b). The First Rings are symbols for the three First Poets, named here as Orpheus, Musaeus, and Homer - in that order. It is made clear that the performers of Homer outnumber by far the performers of Orpheus and Musaeus in the era of Socrates. One such performer of Homer is Ion the rhapsode, described as a Middle Ring in comparison to Homer. By implication, performers of Orpheus and Musaeus are likewise Middle Rings in comparison to Orpheus and Musaeus themselves, who are First Rings like Homer.

A figure like Ion, as a rhapsode, is not a prototypical poet. He is no First Ring. He is not even a poet. As a performer, the rhapsode is merely a Middle Ring linked magnetically to one of the First Rings, in this case, to Homer. Performers of epic, like performers of drama, are Middle Rings in relation to the poets of epic and the poets of drama, who are First Rings, whereas the audiences watching rhapsodes performing Homer - who are like the audiences watching actors performing drama in the theater - are the Last Rings, described as follows by Plato’s Socrates (Plato *Ion* 535e-536a):

Of course you know that this person we talked about, the spectator [*theatēs*] in the audience, {28|29} is the last of the rings - I mean, the rings that get their power from each other through the force of the Heracleian stone. The middle ring is the rhapsode - that’s you [= Ion] - as well as the actor [*hupokritēs*]. And the first ring is the Poet [*poiētēs*] himself.

In introducing this passage, I deliberately used a visual metaphor when I said that the audiences of epic and of drama were ‘watching’ the performers, not just ‘listening’ to them. The wording in the passage makes it explicit that the audiences are ‘spectators’, that is, *theatai*. In using the word *theatēs* ‘spectator’ here in the *Ion* (535e), Plato’s Socrates makes no distinction between the audiences who attend performances of Homeric epic at the Panathenaia and the audiences who attend performances of drama at the City Dionysia and other dramatic festivals.³⁶ The audiences of both epic and drama are the ‘last’ ring. Then there is the ‘middle’ ring, and Socrates places Ion the rhapsode into this category, along with the generic *hupokritēs* ‘actor’ of drama.

³⁶ The theatrical mentality of Athenians is ostentatiously deplored by Kleon as “quoted” by Thucydides 3.38.4: *theatai men tōn logōn ... akroatai de tōn ergōn* ‘spectators of words, audiences of deeds’.

In order to discredit Ion, Plato's Socrates has in effect disconnected the prestige of Ion as the performer of Homeric poetry from the prestige of Homer as the notional composer of Homeric poetry. This way, the prestige of Homer is not directly challenged, just as the prestige of Homeric poetry as the premier poetic event of the Panathenaia cannot be challenged. The idea of Homer as the all-sufficient and all-encompassing Poet is a given. It is already a historical reality.

The dominant status of Homeric poetry is not the only historical reality relevant to the argument in Plato's *Ion*. Another reality is the dominant status of the actual craft of rhapsodically performing - and interpreting - Homeric poetry at the Panathenaia in the dramatic time of Plato's dialogues. I say craft in view of the explicit designation *rhapsōidikē tekhnē* 'rhapsodic craft' as we see it applied by Plato's Socrates at later stages of his argumentation in the *Ion* (538b, 538c, 538d, 539e, 540a, 540d, 541a). Thus the *rhapsōidikē tekhnē* 'rhapsodic craft' of the Panathenaic rhapsode is another given. It too is already a historical reality.

At the earliest stages of his argumentation, however, Plato's Socrates avoids referring to this *tekhnē* of the rhapsode. Instead, he speaks only about the overall craft of the poet, which is designated as *poiētikē tekhnē* 'poetic craft', and he induces Ion to admit that this craft is a *holon*, an integral whole, just like other *tekhnai* (*Ion* 532c). For the moment, I translate *poiētikē* as 'poetic craft', but, as we have seen, it is more accurate to render this word as 'craft of composition', since the *poiētēs* as 'poet' is the composer *par excellence*.

Then Socrates induces Ion to admit that the craft of painters, *graphikē tekhnē*, is likewise a *holon* 'whole' (532e), and that craftsmen are like painters - and sculptors, he adds - in that they need to be experts in the totality of their respective crafts (532e-533b). By the time he speaks about the craft of sculptors, Plato's Socrates has already omitted the word *tekhnē*. This omission facilitates his transition to the passage I have already mentioned about craftsmen such as auletes and citharists and citharodes and rhapsodes (*Ion* 533b-c). Far from speaking of these craftsmen as representatives of separate crafts, Plato's Socrates groups them together as representatives of a single craft, to which he had referred earlier as that integral whole, {29|30} the *poiētikē tekhnē*. How could it be, asks Socrates, that any one of these craftsmen - auletes and citharists and citharodes and rhapsodes - could fail to be an expert in that integral whole, in that single craft of theirs, that is, in the *poiētikē tekhnē*? Ion, who has already accepted the premise that the *poiētikē tekhnē* is an integral whole, a *holon*, is now forced to admit that he simply cannot claim to be such an expert: instead, Ion is an expert only in one aspect of that craft, that is, in the poetry of Homer (533c). From the standpoint of a performer's craft, that poetry must be restricted to epic. The poetry of Homer, as far as a rhapsode like Ion is concerned, can only be epic poetry.

Next, Plato's Socrates induces Ion to accept the idea that the rhapsode's profession is therefore not even a matter of *tekhnē* but rather, a matter of inspiration (*Ion* 533e). By implication, the rhapsode is an expert only in the craft of *mousikē*, the craft of the Muse who inspires poets, not in the craft of the poet himself, that is, in the craft of *poiētikē*. This way, as we have already seen, Ion's authority as a rhapsode can still be validated as 'magnetically' linked to the authority of Homer as poet, which in turn is 'magnetically' linked to the authority of his inspiring Muse as the ultimate source - the ultimate inspiration. Once Ion accepts this idea, however, his authority as a thinker is thereby discredited: he has in effect admitted that, as a rhapsode, he has no mind of his own and simply speaks the mind of Homer. Only after the rhapsode has accepted the idea that he is an inspired performer does Socrates start speaking openly about the 'rhapsodic craft', *rhapsōidikē tekhnē*, in his continued dialogue with the rhapsode. By now it is safe for Socrates to speak this way. Since Ion has already been discredited as a thinker, he cannot invoke his prestigious rhapsodic craft as a source for independent thinking. Even the prestige of Homeric knowledge - to the extent that the rhapsode derives it from his rhapsodic craft - has been diminished: by now the rhapsode's general knowledge seems less impressive than the specialized knowledge that other craftsmen derive from their own specialized crafts.

From the standpoint of a rhapsode, Ion's mistake in the Platonic dialogue named after him is that he missed the chance of asserting, from the very start, that there was indeed such a thing as a 'rhapsodic craft', a *rhapsōidikē tekhnē*. He also missed the chance of asserting that the prestige of this distinct craft was superior to the prestige of other distinct crafts such as those represented by auletes and citharists and maybe even citharodes - at least, at the Panathenaia.

As the craft of rhapsodically performing Homeric poetry evolved in the context of 'musical' competitions at the Panathenaia, it had reached a level of prestige that overshadowed other forms of performance as they too evolved in the context of competitions at the same festival. I have already quoted the passage where these other forms are listed alongside the premier form, that is, alongside the craft of rhapsodically performing Homeric poetry (Plato *Ion* 533b-c). In this passage, which lists the various crafts of performing various kinds of 'music' at the Panathenaia, Plato's Socrates shades over the historical fact that the repertoire of rhapsodes who competed at the Panathenaia was by this time restricted to Homeric poetry, whereas the repertoire of, say, the citharodes was not restricted to the poetry of any single {30|31} master of lyric. Plato's Socrates makes it look like a deficiency that Ion the rhapsode performs - and interprets - Homer and only Homer. Philosophically, this specialization may indeed be a deficiency, but, historically, it is a clear indication of the prestige inherent in the craft of performing the epic of Homer in Athens.

In this same passage from Plato's *Ion* (533b-c), the wording shows that any rhapsode who competes at the Panathenaia practices the craft of a performer, not a composer. The same holds for the crafts of the auletes and the citharists and the citharodes. All such craftsmen are

being viewed as performers at festivals like the Panathenaia, not as composers. Moreover, this view extends also to the prototypes of these craftsmen, that is, to Olympos, Thamyras, Orpheus, and Phemios. All four of these prototypical figures are viewed here as performers in their own right, not as composers per se.

The specialization of these four prototypes of Panathenaic performance is most striking in the case of Phemios, who is being equated in this passage with the figure of an archetypal rhapsode. Plato's Socrates exploits this equation to further his philosophical agenda. We have already seen that the rhapsode can perform and even interpret the content of what he performs at the Panathenaia, that is, the epics of Homer, but he is not the composer of this content. Therefore the rhapsode is not a poet. If Phemios is a rhapsode, then he is not a *poiētēs* 'poet' in the literal sense of this word: he is not the 'maker' of the content. Only Homer can be said to *poiēîn* 'make' the content of Homeric poetry.

From what we have already seen about Phemios, we can picture him as a self-representation of Homer in Homer.³⁷ And yet, the self that is Homer changes over time. When Phemios is equated with a rhapsode in Plato's *Ion*, this equation implies that Phemios is no longer a poet like Homer, since the rhapsode who competes at the Panathenaia is no composer like Homer but merely a performer of Homer. To equate the Panathenaic rhapsode with the self-represented Homer that is Phemios is to detract from Homer the poet. If Phemios in the Homeric *Odyssey* is merely performing but not composing, like some rhapsode competing at the Panathenaia, then he has no say about determining the content of what he performs. Such a recreated Homer can only say what Homer is saying. And what exactly is it that Homer is saying? According to Plato's Socrates, Homer in turn can only say what the Muse is saying.

Thus Plato's Socrates exploits the equating of Phemios with a rhapsode by using it as proof for his argument that the rhapsode has no mind of his own when he performs Homer. This argument, however, can be used to discredit the rhapsode only if the craft of the rhapsode has already been discredited. Plato's Socrates has managed to accomplish that by initially eliding the fact that the rhapsode has his own *tekhnē* 'craft', the *rhapsōidikē tekhnē*. The rhapsode's understanding of Homer, in terms of this *tekhnē*, does not need to be separated from the idea that the rhapsode is inspired by the Muse of Homer. In terms of this *tekhnē*, the professional conceit of the Panathenaic rhapsode is that he reads, as it were, the mind of Homer. The rhapsode's mind has learned the 'meaning' or *dianoia* of Homer (*Ion* 530b-c).³⁸ The living proof of this conceit is the rhapsode's capacity {31|32} to perform Homer by heart at the Panathenaia and to be the perfect *hermēneus* 'interpreter' of Homer (*Ion* 530c).³⁹

³⁷ Graziosi, *Inventing Homer* (n. 15) 25, 39-40.

³⁸ *Plato's Rhapsody* (n. 16) 29-30.

³⁹ *Plato's Rhapsody* (n. 16) 29.

What, then, is the poetry of Homer for the rhapsode? As we saw in the passage I quoted earlier from Isocrates (*Panegyricus* 159), Homeric *poiēsis* ‘poetry’ is a *tekhnē* ‘craft’ that is activated in two linked contexts: (1) the Panathenaic *athloi* ‘competitions’ of rhapsodes in *mousikē* ‘musical craft’ and (2) the *paideusis* ‘education’ of the young. The wording of Isocrates makes it clear that Homeric poetry is a *tekhnē* ‘craft’ in its own right, and that it counts as part of the overall *mousikē* ‘musical craft’ of the Panathenaic *athloi* ‘competitions’ (*Panegyricus* 159).

Unlike Isocrates, however, who implicitly identifies the craft of the rhapsode with the craft of Homer, Plato seeks to make a distinction between the two crafts. He does this by implicitly making a distinction between the crafts of *mousikē* and *poiētikē*, as if the rhapsode were an expert only in the craft of *mousikē*, not in the craft of *poiētikē*.

Already at the very beginning of the *Ion*, Plato’s Socrates had drawn Ion’s attention away from Homeric poetry as a *tekhnē* ‘craft’ in its own right by speaking instead about the more general concept of *poiētikē tekhnē* ‘poetic craft’. Once Socrates induces Ion to admit that the *poiētikē tekhnē* is a *holon* ‘whole’ (532c), much like the *tekhnai* ‘crafts’ of painting and sculpting (532e-533b), he has already succeeded in discrediting the craft of performing and teaching Homeric *poiēsis* ‘poetry’. Such performing and teaching is in effect the *rhapsōidikē tekhnē* of Ion. In order to emphasize the universalized importance of Ion’s craft, I repeat once again the formulation of Isocrates: the *tekhnē* ‘craft’ of Homeric *poiēsis* ‘poetry’ is coextensive with the *paideusis* ‘education’ of the young. Ion has unwittingly discredited his own *tekhnē* once he admits that he is a specialist in Homer. Moreover, in order to validate his specialty, he is forced to deny that his *tekhnē* is really a *tekhnē*.

Plato’s Socrates has forced Ion to make a choice: the rhapsode’s authority comes either from inspiration or from the *poiētikē tekhnē*, the craft of poetry. Ion is forced to choose inspiration as the source of his ultimate authority, since that inspiration comes ultimately from the Muse of Homer. Ion is not allowed to claim the craft of poetry as his ultimate authority because he is forced to admit that he is a master in only one aspect of that craft, that is, in Homeric poetry. Moreover, he is a master in only two of three aspects of that poetry, that is, in performing and interpreting it; he not a master in the third aspect, that is, in composing Homeric poetry.

Plato’s Ion has to make a choice that a rhapsode need not have had to make, between *tekhnē* and inspiration. Provided the rhapsode insists that his craft is really a craft, a specialized *rhapsōidikē tekhnē* instead of the generalized *poiētikē tekhnē*, he can have his own *tekhnē* and still claim to be inspired by the Muse of Homer. With his specialized craft, he can lay claim to the generalized and even universalized *paideusis* ‘education’ represented by the *poiēsis* ‘poetry’ of Homer, since his *rhapsōidikē tekhnē* is part of the overall *mousikē tekhnē* of performing at the Panathenaia.

The time has come to summarize the distinctions in the meanings of *rhapsōidikē*, *mousikē*, and *poiētikē* as applied to the word *tekhnē* ‘craft’ in the age of {32|33} Plato. The *rhapsōidikē tekhnē* is the craft of performing recitative poetry at *agōnes* / *athloi* ‘competitions’, especially at the Panathenaia. The *mousikē tekhnē* is the craft of performing (1) recitative poetry or (2) song and / or (3) instrumental ‘music’ (in the modern sense of the word) at these same *agōnes* / *athloi* ‘competitions’. The *poiētikē tekhnē* is the craft of composing - but not necessarily performing - in the media of *mousikē tekhnē* and in other media as well, including tragedy, comedy, dithyramb, satyr drama, and so on. In the opening of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which is, in Greek terms, a discourse about *poiētikē tekhnē*, we saw a definition that validates in many ways the working definition that I have just offered (*Poetics* 1447a8-18).

In Aristotle’s catalogue of genres of *poiētikē tekhnē* ‘poetic craft’ we have seen the dimension of performance, not only the dimension of composition. Essentially, his catalogue corresponds to the program of performances that took place at the two great festivals of the Athenian state. At the City Dionysia of Athens, there were competitions in the performances of tragedies, comedies, dithyrambs, and satyr dramas. At the Panathenaia of Athens, as we have already seen, there were competitions in the performances of tunes played on the *kithara* or on the *aulos*, also of lyric songs sung to instrumental accompaniment by the *kithara* or by the *aulos*, and also of epic poetry recited without any instrumental accompaniment. That is, the overall *poiētikē tekhnē* ‘poetic craft’ is subdivided into a variety of specialized *tekhnai*. Among these specialized *tekhnai* is the composition of epic, which as we know corresponds to the performance of epic by rhapsodes at the Panathenaia.

As we have seen, the term that Aristotle uses for the composing of ‘epic’, *epopoia* ‘making of *epos*’, indicates a most general concept, since the word used to designate ‘epic,’ *epē* (= *epos* plural), is simply the general word for any kind of verbal art created by way of *poiēsis*. And yet, the whole of Aristotle’s *Poetics* - and in fact the whole of Aristotle’s works in general - operates on the understanding that the only epics of Homer were the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. So epic as a genre is viewed in a specialized way, even though the wording used to express the idea of epic is expressed in a most generalized way. Even the wording of Aristotle indicates, of and by itself, that the composition of Homeric poetry had achieved the most generalized status as poetry par excellence.

By contrast with the composition of Homeric poetry, we have seen in Plato’s *Ion* that its actual performance had achieved a most specialized status as the craft of the rhapsode, *rhapsōidikē tekhnē*. For Plato’s Socrates, this craft is no craft at all, and only the overall *poiētikē tekhnē* may be considered as a *holon*, a ‘whole’, comparable to the categories of painting or sculpting, each of which is likewise a craft that may be considered as a whole. As a category, the generalized craft of composing poetry cannot have as a subcategory the specialized craft of composing Homeric poetry - let alone any specialized craft of performing Homeric poetry.

This kind of thinking is contradicted by Aristotle's *Poetics*, where the generalized craft of composing poetry is a category that can in fact have as a subcategory the specialized craft of composing Homeric poetry - though this specialized craft is expressed in the most generalized way. {33|34}

Returning to Plato's *Ion*, I conclude that the discrediting of the rhapsode's craft, the *rhapsōidikē tekhnē*, can be countered by reconsidering it in its own historical context. The prestige of this *tekhnē* is evidently a threat to the philosophical *tekhnē* of Plato's Socrates. As we saw, the rhapsode is not only a performer of Homer: he is also the *hermēneus* 'interpreter' of Homer (*Ion* 530c). To speak ably about Homer, says Ion, is the most important aspect of his *tekhnē* 'craft' (*Ion* 530c). Homer in turn is recognized as the ultimate source of *paideusis* 'education' for the Hellenes (Plato *Republic* 10.606e).⁴⁰ As an exponent of this *paideusis* 'education', the rhapsode is in effect a significant rival of the philosopher.

How, then, can the rhapsode defend himself against the dialectic of Plato's Socrates? In order to maintain Homer as a generalist in the *poiētikē tekhnē*, the rhapsode must insist on being a specialist in the *rhapsōidikē tekhnē*. That way, he maintains a prestige that is coextensive with the prestige of Homer as a universal educator of Hellenes. Since the rhapsode, as a master of the *rhapsōidikē tekhnē*, is a specialist performer but not a specialist composer, he cannot be considered a master of the *poiētikē tekhnē*. Since the rhapsode is a specialist in performing recitative poetry, to the exclusion of other forms of poetry as also of song and music (in the modern sense of the word), he cannot be considered a master of the *mousikē tekhnē*, either.

A qualification is needed here. Though the rhapsode cannot be a master of *mousikē tekhnē* in the restricted sense of the term as used by Plato, things must have been different in an earlier time. I have in mind a prehistorical time - back when the craft of the rhapsode could still be understood in a less restricted sense that matched the literal meaning of *mousikē tekhnē*, the 'craft of the Muses'. If the rhapsode of prehistoric time was truly master of the 'craft of the Muses', then surely he was capable of inspiration by the Muses, and, just as surely, he was also capable of composing as well as performing. Even the etymology of the word *rhapsōidos*, 'he who sews the songs together', indicates that the rhapsode of prehistoric time had this capability.⁴¹

To have this capability is to be an oral poet. Attested in a wide variety of societies, from prehistoric times all the way into the present, oral poetry can be defined as a system of verbal art that enables the poet to compose while performing and perform while composing, though

⁴⁰ See also Plato *Republic* 2.376e-398b and the commentary of P. Murray, *Plato on Poetry: Ion, Republic 376e-398b, Republic 595-608b* (Cambridge 1996) 205.

⁴¹ *Poetry as Performance* (n. 11) 61-74.

the degrees of composition-in-performance do vary. A classic demonstration is the 1960 book of Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales*.⁴²

To trace the craft of the rhapsode all the way back to an oral poetic phase is to achieve a diachronic perspective - as distinct from the synchronic perspective achieved by way of analyzing this same craft as the medium of ancient Greek epic in the historical context of Athens in the fourth century BCE.⁴³

From such a diachronic perspective, ancient Greek epic can be reassessed as a genre.⁴⁴ When we compare it with forms of oral poetry as attested world-wide in all times and all places, we find a vast array of parallels.⁴⁵ A wide-ranging comparison of existing parallels as analyzed in current ethnographic research leads to an equally wide-ranging application of {34|35} the term epic to current forms of oral poetry that exhibit such parallels.⁴⁶ Conversely, the analysis of existing parallelisms leads to a broader view of the parameters that define ancient Greek epic as a genre.⁴⁷ Such a broadening leads to a refining of comparative methods, which can be divided into three categories: (1) typological, (2) genealogical, and (3) historical. And these methods lead in turn to a refining of such concepts as the epic hero.⁴⁸

The need to refine is made clear by Lord in this elegant formulation of the problems inherent in using such terms as epic and heroic poetry in his book:

The word “epic,” itself, indeed, has come in time to have many meanings. Epic sometimes is taken to mean simply a long poem in “high style.” Yet a very great number of the poems which interest us in this book are comparatively short; length, in fact, is not a criterion of epic poetry. Other definitions of epic equate it with heroic poetry. Indeed the term “heroic poetry” is sometimes used [...] to avoid the very ambiguity in the word epic which troubles us. Yet purists might very well point out that many of the songs which we include in oral narrative poetry are romantic or historical and not heroic, no matter what definition of the hero one may choose. In oral narrative poetry, as a matter of fact, I wish to include all story

⁴² A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge MA 1960; 2nd ed. 2000); see also S. Mitchell and G. Nagy, “Introduction to the Second Edition,” pp. vii-xxix.

⁴³ On the hermeneutics of synchronic and diachronic approaches, see F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris 1916; critical ed. by T. de Mauro 1972) 117.

⁴⁴ Nagy, “Epic as Genre” (n. 8).

⁴⁵ R. P. Martin, “Epic as Genre,” *Companion to Ancient Epic* (ed. J. M. Foley; Oxford 2005) 9-18.

⁴⁶ J. M. Foley, “Analogues: Modern Oral Epics,” *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (n. 45) 196-212.

⁴⁷ Martin, “Epic as Genre,” *Companion to Ancient Epic* (n. 45).

⁴⁸ For a survey of the varieties of epic in world literatures, see G. Nagy, “The Epic Hero,” *Companion to Ancient Epic* (n. 45) 71-89. Fuller version at: http://chs.harvard.edu/publications.sec/online_print_books.ssp/gregory_nagy_the_epic/bn_u_tei.xml_5

poetry, the romantic or historical as well as the heroic; otherwise I would have to exclude a considerable body of medieval metrical narrative.⁴⁹

Even the evidence of Greek literature, which is after all the source of our terminology for genres, has its ambiguities. For example, what we reconstruct as the craft of the rhapsode in its prehistoric oral poetic phase cannot even be confined to a single genre, epic. Even in historical times, rhapsodes are known to perform in genres other than epic.⁵⁰ Moreover, an internal analysis of the primary evidence for epic, which is the surviving text of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, points to a multiplicity of genres.⁵¹ So instead of saying that these existing genres are subgenres of a genre that is epic, it is more apt to say that the framing form of the epic is a supergenre that accommodates other genres.⁵²

In short, a comparative approach to epic yields a far broader view of ancient Greek epic as a genre. Such a broadened view does not and in fact cannot explain, however, the history of this genre as exemplified by Homer and by the rhapsodic craftsmen who mediated Homer well after Homer, in the era of Plato and Aristotle. Working our way forward in time beyond the era of Plato and Aristotle, we find that the history of the genre becomes ever more problematic. And the greatest problem of them all is the fact that the genre of epic had become equated with Homer himself, as if Homer could exist without his epic tradition - and without the authorized mediation of the rhapsode.

But the hard truth is, the prestige of the rhapsode as an authorized mediator of Homer - let alone poetry in general - was already moribund for intellectuals in the time of Plato. It was in fact moribund even earlier, in the time of Socrates. We see it in the casually disparaging remarks of his contemporaries dramatized in Xenophon's *Symposium* (3.6). It was already a case of terminal prestige.⁵³ {35|36}

The fatal blow was struck by Plato himself. In the end, Plato's philosophy killed off the rhapsode as the authorized mediator of Homer. Not only was Homer, along with all other poets, banned from the ideal state of Plato's most definitive philosophical project, the *Republic*. Perhaps even worse for Homer, his rhapsodic mediators were rendered obsolete. Homer as the Poet par excellence now had to speak for himself, through his text, without the authorized mediation of the rhapsodes. The blow struck by Plato was fatal because the cosmopolitan

⁴⁹ Lord, *Singer of Tales* (n. 42) 6.

⁵⁰ *Poetry as Performance* (n. 11) 157-160.

⁵¹ R. P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes* (Ithaca 1989).

⁵² R. P. Martin, "Similes and Performance." *Written Voices, Spoken Signs* (ed. E. Bakker and A. Kahane; Cambridge MA 1997) 138-166, esp. p. 166.

⁵³ For the term terminal prestige, see S. McClary, "Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition," *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989) 57-81.

world of philosophers and other intellectuals could no longer be accommodated by the heroic world of Homer as mediated by the rhapsode.

In the wake of Plato, the writings of Aristotle show no trace of any role for the rhapsode in the mediation of Homer - or of epic in general. Now the only person who can speak for epic is the mythologized culture hero Homer, revered as the be-all and end-all for defining not only epic but also Greek culture writ large. And this Homer can speak only through his text, which is by now the only authority that can back up that text. For Aristotle, this Homer is the ideal Poet who defines epic.

Aristotle's understanding of epic as defined by the ideal Poet is most decisive in the history of literature. Such an understanding leaves as its permanent legacy an overwhelming burden of the past.⁵⁴ Even more than that, the burden can be rethought as an all-consuming anxiety of influence.⁵⁵

Here I return to the formulation of Croce, who went so far as to define any great work of literature as something that is *sui generis*. This formulation, as I noted from the start, applies to the poetry of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. At least, it applies in the sense that the Greeks did in fact view this poetry as something that was *sui generis*. After all, this poetry was thought to be the creation of the ideal Poet. But now the question is, was it really Homer's greatness that made him one of a kind, *sui generis*?

In addressing this question, I find the formulation of Croce insufficient. In terms of this formulation, as I also noted from the start, it is as if a great work of literature had to transcend its own genre simply because of its greatness. I highlight the phrasing "as if," since I will now argue that the transcendence of Homeric poetry can be explained in relative rather than absolute terms. This poetry transcended the genre of epic only to the extent that its greatness could not be defined in terms of other epics. Instead, this greatness could in fact be defined in terms of another genre. For Plato and Aristotle, that other genre was tragedy.

Both Plato and Aristotle recognized the strongest of affinities between Homer and tragedy. In the second half of the fifth century BCE, which is the truly classical period of Greek literature, the ultimate poetic craft or *tekhnē* of poetry was deemed to be not epic but tragedy. One of the clearest examples is the celebrated scene of a grand contest held in Hades between Aeschylus and Euripides in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes (905-1098). What is at stake in this contest is the superiority or inferiority of the old or the current ways of making tragedy, as represented by Aeschylus and Euripides respectively. And the craft of making tragedy is

⁵⁴ In using the term burden of the past, I follow the hermeneutics developed by W. J. Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Cambridge MA 1970; New York 1972).

⁵⁵ In using the term anxiety of influence, I follow the hermeneutics developed by H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford 1973; 2nd ed. 1997).

consistently equated with the craft of making poetry *par excellence*. Throughout the comedy, there are references to tragedy as the ultimate *tekhnē* or ‘craft’ (*Frogs* 93, 766, 770, {36|37} 780, 786, 793, 811, 831, 850, 939, 961, 973, 1369, 1495). The privileged status of tragedy as the craft of poetry *par excellence* is the one given that is held in respect by both sides in the contest.⁵⁶

According to Aristotle, the craft of tragedy achieves perfection in its complete and unified structure. And he sees a comparable structure in only two epics, the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle says explicitly that only the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are comparable to tragedy because only these two epics show a complete and unified structure, unlike the epics of the Cycle (1459a-b). This judgment of Aristotle helps explain why he ostentatiously pairs the genre of epic with the genre of tragedy at the beginning of the *Poetics* (*epopoia ... kai hē tēs tragōidias poiēsis*).⁵⁷ And he views these two particular genres, epic and tragedy, as cognates (*Poetics* 1449a2-6).⁵⁸ In the works of Plato as well, epic is viewed as a cognate of tragedy: more than that, Homer is represented as a proto-tragedian (*Theaetetus* 152e; *Republic* 10.595c, 598d, 605c, 607a).

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle links the existing forms of epic and tragedy to a proto-form of *humnoi* ‘hymns’ and *enkōmia* ‘encomia, celebrations, songs of praise’, and he contrasts epic and tragedy with the existing form of comedy, linking that form with a proto-form of *psogoi* ‘invectives’ (*Poetics* 1448b25-27). More generally, Aristotle reconstructs a prehistoric dichotomy between the ethics of proto-poets who are *semnoteroi* or ‘more stately’ and the ethics of would-be proto-poets who are by comparison *eutelesteroi*, that is, ‘of less value’. According to this construct, poets who are *semnoteroi* are those engaged in the *mimēsis* or ‘re-enactment’ of actions that are *kala* ‘noble’ and that are performed by those who are *kaloi* ‘noble’, while poets who are *eutelesteroi* ‘of less value’ are characterized by actions that are *phaula* ‘base’ and are performed by those who are *phauloi* ‘base’. Here is the wording of Aristotle (1448b25-27):

The more stately ones [*semnoteroi*] made *mimēsis* [[1]] of noble deeds and [[2]] of the deeds of (other) such stately ones, while the ones who were of less value (made *mimēsis*) of the deeds of the base. In the beginning, the latter made invectives [*psogoi*], while the former made *humnoi* and *enkōmia*.

I restate two points that Aristotle is making here: first, *humnoi* ‘hymns’ and *enkōmia* ‘encomia, celebrations, songs of praise’ are the undifferentiated prototypes of epic and

⁵⁶ J. Herington, *Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1985) 106.

⁵⁷ Nagy, “Epic as Genre” (n. 8) 26-27.

⁵⁸ G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore 1979; 2nd ed. 1999) 14§§1-5.

tragedy, and, second, both these prototypes involve *mimēsis* ‘re-enactment’.⁵⁹ Of special relevance is a third point that Aristotle makes elsewhere in the *Poetics*: it is not only the prototypical *humnoi* and *enkōmia* but also epic and tragedy that directly involve the *mimēsis* ‘re-enactment’ of the noble by the noble, as we see in several passages (1448a1-2, 26-27; 1448b34-36; 1449b9-10, 17-20, 24-28). In these passages, the word for ‘noble’ is *spoudaioi*, meaning literally ‘the serious ones’.

The idea that the *spoudaioi* ‘serious ones’ and the *semnoteroi* ‘more stately ones’ are engaging in *mimēsis* ‘re-enactment’ of what is noble is relevant to the use of the word *mimēisthai* ‘re-enact’ in the *Homeric Hymn* (3) to *Apollo* (verse 163). Here the performers of *mimēsis* are the Delian Maidens, whose ‘seriousness’ or ‘stateliness’ is a given. And the *mimēsis* is taking place in the context of a *humnos*. For Aristotle, *mimēsis* takes place in prototypical {37|38} *humnoi* that have not yet become differentiated into epic and tragedy. Here in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, we see an approximation of such a model, to the extent that it resembles both epic and tragedy: this *Hymn* is like epic because it has the same meter as epic, dactylic hexameter, and because its diction is closely related to epic diction, while it is like tragedy because it is theatrical, as we see from the usage of the term *hupokrinesthai* ‘respond’ with reference to the quoted words of the Maidens in the *Hymn* (verse 171).⁶⁰ Moreover, the usage of the term *mimēisthai* ‘re-enact’ (verse 163) is in fact explicitly theatrical.⁶¹ It can be argued that the use of a theatrical word like *mimēisthai* in *Homeric Hymn* (3) to *Apollo* (verse 171) reveals an early phase of an ongoing symbiosis of two elements: one was the Homeric tradition as it evolved at the Athenian festival of the Panathenaia and the other was the theatrical tradition of drama - especially tragedy - as it evolved at the Athenian festival of the City Dionysia.⁶²

Aristotle’s association of tragedy with Homer, and of Homer with epic, is not merely a matter of literary judgment. By the time of Aristotle, as we have already seen, the only epics performed at the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens were the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. These two epics shaped and were shaped by the genre of tragedy as performed at the festival of the City Dionysia. In Athens, ever since the sixth century BCE, the genre of epic as performed at the Panathenaia and the genre of tragedy as performed at the City Dionysia were

⁵⁹ Pindar’s *Homer* (n. 7) 6§91.

⁶⁰ G. Nagy, *Homeric Responses* (Austin 2003) 21-22.

⁶¹ *Poetry as Performance* (n. 11) 80-81.

⁶² *Poetry as Performance* (n. 11) 81. The symmetry of the Panathenaia and the City Dionysia as the two most important festivals of the Athenians is evident in a formulation by Demosthenes in the *First Philippic* (4.35).

“complementary forms, evolving together and thereby undergoing a process of mutual assimilation in the course of their institutional coexistence.”⁶³

By the time of Aristotle, this complementarity of epic and tragedy involved only the epics of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, no longer the epics of the Cycle. This differentiation of the epic Cycle from the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* can be linked with the obsolescence of performing the poetry of the epic Cycle at the Panathenaia. Not only in the fourth century BCE, the age of Aristotle, but also earlier in the fifth century, the age of Plato’s Socrates, the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were the only epics performed at the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens. The epics of the Cycle, by contrast, were excluded from the repertoire of the Panathenaia in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.⁶⁴

Two of the most outstanding epics of the Cycle were the *Thebaid* and the *Epigoni*.⁶⁵ Such alternative epic poetry was absorbed into the tragic poetry of the City Dionysia, as in the case of the *Seven against Thebes* of Aeschylus (produced in 467 BCE), which is evidently a tragic version of the epic *Thebaid*.⁶⁶

In the sixth century BCE, by contrast with the fifth and the fourth, the epic Cycle was more broadly conceived. And so also Homer was more broadly conceived. The poetic traditions represented by such epics as the *Seven against Thebes*, the *Epigoni*, the *Cypria*, and the *Little Iliad* could be attributed to Homer. In this earlier era, Homer was a master poet who created not only the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but also the entire epic Cycle, and the very concept of the Cycle (*kuklos*) was a symbol of a notional totality, the sum total of Homer’s poetic creation.⁶⁷

Such an earlier and broader idea of Homer is incompatible with the Homer of later times who had only two epics to his name, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. From {38|39} the standpoint of Plato and Aristotle, the epic poetry of such an earlier Homer could not be *sui generis*. Not only that, the poetry of such a Homer would not have been epic. For Plato and Aristotle, only the Homer of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* defined epic. The epics of the Cycle would not be epic. As Aristotle argues in the *Poetics*, epic is defined by way of its affinity with tragedy,

⁶³ *Poetry as Performance* (n. 11) 81.

⁶⁴ G. Nagy, *Homer’s Text and Language* (Urbana 2004) 28-30. On the concept of a “Panathenaic bottleneck,” see p. 30.

⁶⁵ For an appreciation of the epic *Thebaid* as an esthetic rival of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, see especially Pausanias 9.9.5. The wording of Herodotus 5.67 suggests that the epic themes of the *Thebaid* and the *Epigoni* may have been the basic repertoire for performances at the festivals of Argos and Sikyon: see E. Cingano, “Clistene di Sicione, Erodoto e i poemi del Ciclo tebano,” *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 20 (1985) 31-40, with reference to Herodotus 5.67. See also *Pindar’s Homer* (n. 7) 1§10 n. 22.

⁶⁶ G. Nagy, “‘Dream of a Shade’: Refractions of Epic Vision in Pindar’s *Pythian* 8 and Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes*,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 100 (2000) 97-118.

⁶⁷ G. Nagy, *Homeric Questions* (Austin 1996) 38.

which achieves perfection in its complete and unified structure. Only Homer has that perfection, and that Homer is the poet of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The epics of the Cycle do not have that perfection, according to Aristotle, and so Homer cannot be the poet of these epics, which must have been made by other poets. And they are not really epics, since they are not created by Homer.

Once again we see that epic must be an ideal genre created by an ideal Poet. Once again we are confronted with the overwhelming burden of the past, with an all-consuming anxiety of influence. Once again we see that the genre of epic is defined by Homer, and that this genre is therefore *sui generis*.

How, then, can any new poet recreate epic? The question itself is overwhelming. The only way to recreate this genre is to become the ideal Poet. But how can any new poet become the ideal Poet? The lack of a clear response leaves the genre of epic stranded in splendid isolation, stranded for good.

That is why the history of epic in world literature is a long-term story of emulating but not re-enacting Homer as a perfect model. How well this model is emulated depends on how well it is understood, and the levels of understanding vary over time. In the history of Greek literature after Plato and Aristotle, the most distinguished example of emulation is the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes, who flourished in the third century BCE. This poetic achievement displays a masterful understanding of Homeric poetry - even of its textual and exegetical history.⁶⁸ As poetry, however, it does not replace Homer as a new standard to follow, and the ultimate model remains Homer.

In the history of Roman literature, on the other hand, the most distinguished example of Homeric emulation becomes an ultimate model of epic in its own right. That example is the *Aeneid* of Virgil, who flourished in the second half of the first century BCE. The emulation of Homer by Virgil is made most explicit by way of the symmetry inherent in this Roman epic: the first half of the *Aeneid* is clearly modeled on the *Odyssey* and the second, on the *Iliad*.

Virgil's understanding of his Homeric model is exquisite: as a poet who emulates the ostensibly ultimate Poet, he achieves in his own right the status of an ultimate poetic model in the overall history of Roman civilization, and this status rivals that of Homer in the overall history of Greek civilization.⁶⁹ Even more, Virgil transcends Roman literature, becoming the model of epic for all the world literatures that link to Roman literature as their overall model.

⁶⁸ A. Rengakos, *Apollonius Rhodios und die antike Homererklärung* (Zetemata 92, Munich 1994).

⁶⁹ M. C. J. Putnam, "Virgil's *Aeneid*," *Companion to Ancient Epic* (n. 45) 452-475.

For the likes of Petrarch, Milton, Tasso, Camões, and countless other major poets in the history of European literature, Virgil becomes the new ideal poet of epic.⁷⁰

But now a major question looms. Though Virgil becomes the new ideal poet of epic, is his *Aeneid* really an epic? The answer has to be qualified: Virgil is a poet of {39|40} epic only to the extent that Homer defines epic in the history of Greek literature after Plato and Aristotle. Virgil emulates that Homer, just as he emulates other emulators of Homer, including Apollonius of Rhodes. But his *Aeneid* is not a re-enactment of the genre represented by the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. That genre is too narrow to suit the *Aeneid* of Virgil. To that extent, Virgil's epic is not really an epic.

The objection could be made that Virgil's *Aeneid* was nevertheless an epic if we think of epic in his terms. It could be said that Virgil's own view of epic transcended Homer, and that his epic model was broader than the Homeric model, which in turn was narrower than earlier Greek models of epic as a genre. As we have seen, the history of Greek literature before Plato and Aristotle indicates a broader view of Homer - and a broader view of what eventually became understood as epic. We can actually observe Virgil's own broader view in his reliance on traditions linked to the so-called epic Cycle.⁷¹ We can even say that Virgil is consistent in indicating his awareness of poetic formalities that transcended Homer. Nevertheless, this transcendence was for Virgil a matter of emulating a variety of poets in addition to Homer - including the poets of epic in the early Republican era of Rome.⁷² It was not a matter of actually re-enacting the genre of epic as a genre in its narrower or broader forms. At best, then, we can follow C. S. Lewis by referring to the *Aeneid* of Virgil as "secondary epic."⁷³

⁷⁰ C. Kallendorf, "Virgil's Post-classical Legacy," *Companion to Ancient Epic* (n. 45) 574-588.

⁷¹ Such a reliance is typical of Roman epic poetry in general: see pp. 425-428 of J. Farrell, "The Origins and Essence of Roman Epic," *Companion to Ancient Epic* (n. 45) 417-428.

⁷² S. M. Goldberg, "Early Republican Epic," *Companion to Ancient Epic* (n. 45) 429-439.

⁷³ I am grateful to Richard Eldridge for guiding me to this felicitous wording, to be found in C. S. Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford 1942 / 1961). His Chapter 3 is called "Primary Epic," and it begins with this distinction: "The secondary here means not 'the second rate', but what comes after, and grows out of, the primary" (p. 13). Lewis takes Homeric poetry and the *Beowulf* as his principal examples of primary epics. Chapter VI is called "Virgil and the Subject of Secondary Epic," and it begins with this sentence: "The epic subject, as later critics came to understand it, is Virgil's invention; he has altered the very meaning of the word epic." The underlying idea is that a subject or theme may be invented by a poet for a new readership. But the distinction seems to trace to Milton's "The Reason of Church Government," reprinted in Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Hughes, (ed. M. Y. Hughes; New York 1957) 669-670. The epics of Homer (and of Virgil and Tasso) result, he says, from "the inspired gift of God rarely bestow'd, but yet to some (though most abuse) in every nation: and are of power beside the office of a pulpit, to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu, and publick

In the end, then, we are left with a paradox. The clearest way for us to view epic as a genre is to keep on looking at Homer synchronically - as he is understood in the historical period of Plato and Aristotle. Our view becomes instantly clouded, however, once we start looking at Homer diachronically. Homer as a model of epic meant too many different things to too many different poets over the ages. And that is because poets emulated not the epic of Homer but Homer himself. Much the same predicament awaited the greatest emulator of Homer, the poet Virgil. When another great poet, Dante, emulated Virgil in his *Divine Comedy*, begun in 1307, his model was clearly Virgil, not the epic of Virgil.

Without the genre of epic, the poet of epic can be emulated at will, without rules, since the poet seems to have no rules. He is simply a genius. Thomas Blackwell, in his *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1736), says that Homer was the ultimate poetic genius because he needed no "rules" for making epic - and because he did not even know any such rules.⁷⁴ Such is the fate of epic as genre - once Plato succeeds in detaching Homer from the authorized transmission of Homer by rhapsodes like Ion.

civility." There is a summary of the distinction in R. Jenkyns, *Classical Epic: Homer and Virgil* (London 1992) 55-56, where it is treated as a commonplace among critics.

⁷⁴ N. R. Grobman, "Thomas Blackwell's Commentary on The Oral Nature of Epic," *Western Folklore* 38 (1979) 186-198.